IMMEDIATE ACTION—Walter J. Seaborn is chairman of the Three Rivers Forum, a group which proposes immediate controls insofar as zoning, water and sanitation are concerned to assure proper development of the booming community, short distance from planned resort.
Times photo by R. L. Oliver

DISNEY PROJECT BOOM SPLITS SIERRA TOWN

Dreams of Riches Turn Friends Into Foes

BY LEONARD GREENWOOD
Times Staff Writer

THREE RIVERS—For a century, this little community in the Sierra foothills northeast of Visalia has been a haven of peace in a setting of natural splendor.

The first settlers who arrived in the 1860s, were tough, independent men in search of a place to build a home, raise a family and be close to the earth.

They planted trees and flowers which were watered by the north, east and south forks of the clear, sparkling Kaweah River. These three "rivers" gave the community its name.

Gradually the settlers turned to cattle ranching, and some planted apple orchards. In spring, the valley was white with blossoms.

It was a close-knit community, made so by its isolation, and it remained that way until two years ago.

It was in 1964 that information of Walt Disney's plans to develop a $40-million year-round recreation project at Mineral King, a giant valley amid the peaks of the Sierra, about 35 miles from Three Rivers, first leaked out.

Town Isn't Same

Three Rivers, which lies on the highway to Mineral King, hasn't been the same since.

Realtors moved in and property began to change hands with prices soaring in some cases to five times what they were a couple of years ago.

The boom, based on the prospect of resort area business, was not universally welcomed.

Bitter words were exchanged. Friendships of more than a quarter of a century were broken.

"It hurts me deeply to see people who have been friends all their lives arguing and fighting like this," said Supervisor Carl Booth of Tulare County.

The major issue splitting residents is how development can be planned so it will be orderly and not ruin the natural beauty of the area.

The opposing factions have formed two groups, the Three Rivers Community Council and the Three Rivers Forum. Sometimes they do not speak to each other. Often, they refer to the rival group as "the other side."

Want to Move Fast

The council was formed first by a group which wanted to move fast. But when the community came together to elect a 50-member central committee and a nine-member board, most of the early activists were voted out of power because they wanted to move too fast for the others. They split away and formed the forum.

Both groups claim they want planned development. Council members want a flexible plan and do not want to rush into something they feel they might regret later. Forum members want tough regulations as quickly as possible because they fear there is little time to act if Three Rivers is to be saved from uncontrolled subdivision and ugly strip development.

Arthur Hardison, chairman of the council, says: "You could liken the two groups to the hare and the tortoise.

"Some people want to get things done with an urgency which is not normal for country people. This has come so quickly, most people

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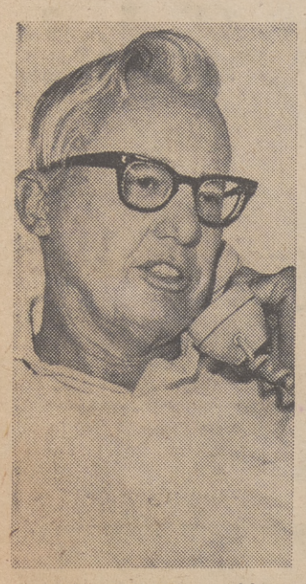
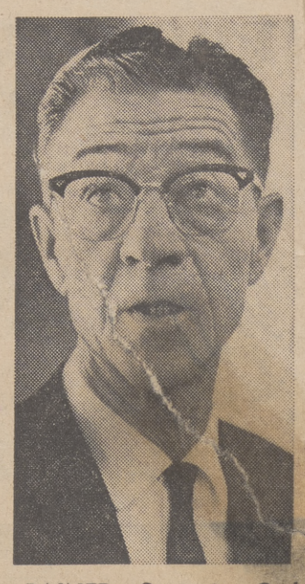


BOOM DENIED — Harry C. Waters denies Three Rivers has big land boom.
Times photo



PAINED—Supervisor Carl Booth deplores fight over the Three Rivers boom.
Times photo

DISNEY RESORT

Continued from First Page

haven't had time to get their breath. People are afraid of what is happening, and it is human to back away from something you don't understand.

Disturbed by Development

"People on both sides contribute a lot to the community. The people on the forum, by their action, alerted us to what is coming. I've been disturbed to see this develop. We've had differences before, but nothing of these proportions."

Two of the main problems are water supplies and sewage. In the past, there were few people and thus no problem. With a growing population, experts warn the river is becoming polluted and sewage disposal needs prompt attention.

Harry Conaway, Tulare County director of planning, headquartered in Visalia, says: "We urgently need a plan for the community. Land prices rose steeply, so we stepped in with zoning to stabilize things. We should have had a master plan first, but we did not have the staff or the money.

"Now I have suggested we apply for federal assistance under the 701 program. Under this, we'd appoint an expert to draw up a development plan for Three Rivers. He then applies to the state for a grant. If the state agrees, it makes application to the federal government, which will then pay two-thirds of the cost of the plan.

Sees Action in 2 Years

"If we act quickly, we could have our plan in two years."

But even over seeking federal aid, there is deep disagreement.

Hunter Crosby, secretary of the council, says: "The other side wants to go too fast. We want time to study it. Perhaps 701 is good, but we are a little afraid of it. Some of us feel it may open the way for federal takeover of land for public use and too much federal sayso in what we do with our property."

Harry C. Waters, a Visalia realtor, has lived in Three Rivers many years, and recently opened an office there. He denies there has been a big boom in land here turns over once.

"Now, you tell me, who stands to gain most by keeping the land changing hands and delaying control."

Land prices have spiraled in a wave of speculation ignited by the Mineral King development scheduled for completion by 1976. Potential commercial property is being sold, resold and sold again at successively higher prices.

Cites Price Increases

Bill Hart, part owner of a store here, points to one 37-acre parcel which he says sold for $80,000 three years ago. "A few months ago it was resold and brought $459,000," he said. "Now, an oil company has bought one acre of it for $40,000."

Another parcel of 27 acres sold for $75,000 three years ago, was resold for $127,000 and six months ago was sold again for $235,000. Today it is said to have a market value of $500,000.

The County Planning Authority and the Board of Supervisors are watching the dispute carefully. In the end, they will have to decide what to do about Three Rivers, but they would like to have the cooperation of the people.

Supervisor Carl Booth called a meeting of representatives from both groups. "You people," he told them, "all want the same thing. But you let minor problems and personality conflicts stand in the way.

"You are not the people I used to know. This battle has changed you into something to be ashamed of."

Booth sums it up this way: "One group wants to move further and faster than the other. It is a matter of degree and application. Three Rivers needs control, but they should not be too rigid. The population is growing. If we get 3,000 or 4,000 people in here, without controls, Three Rivers will die."

"However, the end interests of both sides are almost the same, and I think they will eventually come together."

Most people in Three Rivers agree they will finally have to work together.

But will they act in time?

River Polluted

Carol Barns, a sculptor who has lived here 25 years, believes it is already very late. "We'll have 5,000 people here in five years. The river is already polluted.

"I've pressed for quick action, and I've been called a Communist and pestered by crank telephone calls because of the stand I've taken.

"This controversy has split our community wide open. It's happened in other places, but I hate to see it happen here. The acrimony and slander have been unbelievable. My wife and I have been talking about leaving for some time. For professional reasons, I feel I should be closer to other artists. But now we're going. I'm sick and tired of it.

"I believe the land developers are to blame more than anyone. They want to cut up the land and sell, because that's where their profit is. They don't want controls.

"I hate to see the whole place changed, just chop, chop, chop and rows of hamburger stands. Some of the people of Three Rivers have lived here so many years they have no idea how fast these things can move.

"I wish they could see what has happened at places like Lake Tahoe. If they could see how the beauty of California has been destroyed by unplanned development, I'm sure they'd move to save Three Rivers."

Pledges to Do His Best

"I live at Three Rivers. I'll do my best to see development and speculation do not get out of hand. What we, on the council, want is to try to see this development go as smoothly and pleasantly as possible."

Walter J. Seaborn, president of the forum, says action must be taken immediately. "Without some kind of plan, the community will develop helter skelter, just like many other places have done.

"With this Disney development up the road, there is bound to be rapid growth here. We can't stop it. But we want it to be orderly. We want a community we can be proud of. But there's so little time and we're not getting going.

"The people in the council fall roughly into two groups. There's the old timer, who feels threatened and worried by changes he doesn't understand. He just wishes they'd all go away.

Hits Realtors

"Then there's the group which says, 'This is my property and I'll do what I want to do with it.' The developers and real estate people come in this group. Ten years ago, there were no realtors at all. They've been a disturbing element.

"Who do I blame? Well, let me put it like this. Three Rivers has about 4,000 acres of fairly level land. At present, it brings about $5,000 an acre.

Five per cent of this total value is a million dollars—and that's what the realtors make (in commissions), at a conservative estimate, every time the

SLOW APPROACH—Homebuilder Hunter Crosby of Three Rivers favors controls and a slow approach to community development in path of Disney resort.
Times photo

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